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## **Latin America's Emerging Network on Social Policy**

*by Mario Torres*

"In absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population ... there is today more poverty in the region than at the beginning of the 1980s." Inter-American Development Bank, 1993.

The idea for a Latin American Network on Social Policy Research emerged in 1991 from IDRC's Social Policy Program in the region. At that time, the negative impact of the lost decade of the 1980s was evident in all social programs and policies. Budget cuts, poor public sector salaries, low quality of social services, and unequal access to services were the chief ingredients of a social crisis that called for rethinking the approach to social policies in the region.

It was clear that a major effort was required to overcome fragmentation of research capacities, the isolation of social policy planning within separate sectors, and the lack of a systemic view about human development problems.

Responding to this challenge led to an IDRC project aimed at determining regional social policy research priorities, a project that formed the nucleus of the still emerging network from the participating institutions. But launching the project and network entailed laying groundwork through regional consultations among researchers, policy makers and practitioners from diverse social policy fields. Three workshops were organized with the collaboration of universities, government departments, and organizations such as the Economic Commission for Latin America, and the Latin American Centre for Demography (CELADE) in Chile.

The initial goals were to inventory institutions within each country capable of conducting social policy research and to identify strategic research, training and information initiatives that could quickly improve the effectiveness of social policies. The strongest research institutions in the area of economics were chosen to lead the project. In today's fiscal climate, social policy proposals must be buttressed by hard evidence of the costs and benefits.

The Social Policy Network began with Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Uruguay as participant countries. They represent a range of social policy systems, social and economic problems, and development levels. Brazil and Mexico were later added, owing to the characteristics of their social problems, among other factors. Collaborating institutions were selected on the basis of solid relations with public and private sector organizations, and experience and prestige in economic and social policy research.

At the risk of over-simplification, the network has identified the following priorities:

- development of frameworks for social policy-making from an inter-sectoral perspective;
- analysis of the social policy-making processes and participant social actors;

- information systems for the provision of useful and timely data;
- methodologies for monitoring, managing and evaluating social policy and its impact on quality and equity;
- analysis of institutional frameworks with special attention to reform processes, decentralization and privatization;
- evaluation of public social expenditure, cost-effectiveness of programs and mechanisms to obtain accountability; and
- evaluation of training systems and design of alternatives to develop new professional expertise with a multidisciplinary and intersectoral perspective.

By early 1994, institutions from each network country will have produced country reports, the basis of a regional report suggesting future directions for social policy development. A regional seminar in Ottawa in mid-1994 will permit discussion of social policy issues from a Latin American perspective as well as comparing the experience of Canada and other regions. With the first research phase nearly complete, the seminar will also give network members the chance to reflect on the value of further collaboration in a second phase of activities.

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